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ABSTRACT

This working paper explores current thinking about self-esteem in adolescent girls in a pluralistic or multicultural society. A large percentage of current discussion and research on gender, adolescence, and self-esteem overlooks the diversity among females and neglects to analyze how various identities interweave with gender and strongly influence self-esteem in women. The paper contains the following chapters: (1) Defining, Measuring, and Other Issues in Research; (2) Race, Class, and Other Identities in Young Women's Search for Self; (3) The Role of Sexism in Self-Esteem; (4) Developing Resistance and Resilience; and (5) Conclusion. The chapter discussing defining and measuring notes that there is not a clear definition of self-esteem and that a number of factors are part of this complex concept. The chapter about sexism summarizes gender based violence, schools and education, public and private discourse, the developing female body, and media representation and influence. The chapter about resistance and resilience reviews naming and externalizing bias, transforming schools for multicultural history and perspectives, connection with the community, role models and mentors, high expectations, overcoming barriers and developing skills. The paper concludes with the proposition that self-esteem in girls can be enhanced in two ways. The first is systemically changing the cultural institutions and thought that devalue women. The second is raising strong young women who can balance their strengths and weaknesses and live to their highest potential. (KM)

Center for Equity and Cultural Diversity

Working Papers Series

Building Self

Adolescent Girls and Self-Esteem

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Self-Esteem from a Perspective of Pluralism

Educators, sociologists, and psychologists have in the past few decades been examining the role self-esteem plays in young people's development, ability to take advantage of opportunities, and capacity to contribute to their community and society. This research has provided us with numerous insights into these issues and suggested a number of directions worth pursuing. One of these has been a gender analysis of self-esteem and investigation into why girls as a group show lower self-esteem than boys. Recently, several studies and analyses have explored the relationship between sexism in our culture and low self-esteem in girls and women (Greenberg-Lake, 1991; Steinem, 1992; Tschirhart Sanford & Donovan, 1984).

A large percentage of current discussion and research on gender, adolescence, and self-esteem, however, overlooks the diversity among females and neglects to analyze how various identities—such as race, ethnicity, and class—interweave with gender and strongly influence self-esteem in young women. For instance, while a number of research projects, including the Harvard Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls, focus on young women's experiences of increased silencing and distancing from their perceived reality, this phenomenon—while important and intriguing—seems at this point to be a mainly White middle-class experience.

An example of dilemmas arising from this particular way of looking at self-esteem in young women is a sensed incongruity when we find that African American young women as a group do not suffer from lower self-esteem than White young women (Greenberg-Lake, 1991). Many of us intuitively suppose that adolescents facing the burden of not only sexism but racism will undoubtedly exhibit lower self-esteem than White young women who experience sexism but benefit from their racial identity. These assumptions, however, as researchers like Sonia Nieto (1992) and Gloria Johnson Powell (1983) have pointed out, ignore the complex understandings

individuals have of themselves and their societies, as well as the active dialogue an individual continually conducts with those societal messages. They are based on the idea that, in the words of a now famous educational metaphor, individuals are "empty vessels," passively absorbing what society tells them.

Thus, in a state of California–sponsored study on self-esteem and social problems, we find statements like the following: "If individuals are members of a group in society, usually a minority group, that is routinely abased, thought to be inferior, and denied access to chances for advancement and a share of the good things in life, those individuals may pick up and wear the image that they do not count for much or deserve much" (Mecca, Smelser & Vasconcellos, 1989, 8). While this is the first part of the equation, and while these facts indisputably put some children and adults at risk for low self-esteem, the perspective minimizes the complexity of identity development, as well as the family and community supports that may help those very groups withstand negative societal messages (Nieto, 1992, 235).

Researchers are finding that adolescents are hardly passive in their acceptance of these messages. For instance, researchers Michelle Fine and Pat MacPherson have found that we "have been persistently committed to public representations of women's victimization and structural assaults, and have consequently ignored, indeed misrepresented, how well young women talk as subjects, passionate about and relishing in their capacities to move between nexuses of power and powerlessness. That is to say, feminist scholars have forgotten to take notice of how firmly young women resist—alone and sometimes together" (1993, 129). This observation is supported by several researchers who carried out studies with working-class and Puerto Rican women and found that these young women actively challenge gender-role definitions imposed on them (Weis, 1992; Blanc, 1992).

Low self-esteem is a serious problem for many young women, and partly because it is linked with other problems, is a vital area for study. It is important when we do this, however, that we frame questions and analyze data from a multicultural perspective that is attuned to the ways gender identities are formed in tandem with racial, ethnic, sexual, class, and religious identities. By framing research and discussion this way, we acknowledge the complexities of our identities and can explore gender not only as an integral

element of who we are but also as inextricable from the other portions of our identity.

In this working paper, I will explore what the research says about self-esteem during the period in girls' lives when they move into adolescence, and what we might learn from young women who are able to maintain their self-esteem relatively intact. I will begin by outlining what we mean when we speak of "self-esteem," and will then briefly review factors that put young women at risk for low self-esteem, highlighting, when available, research that looks at the diversity in female experience . Finally, I will identify ways in which some young women avoid internalizing negative societal messages about being female, and what this means for adults, especially educators, who work with young women.

Defining, Measuring, and Other Issues in the Research

Almost every study or survey on self-esteem begins by noting that current research presents problems because of lack of agreement on the meaning of self-esteem, as well as on the terminology, as evidenced by the following quotations:

> One of the difficulties faced by those who wish to work seriously with self-perceptions is the lack of agreement about how various terms ought to be defined. (Beane & Lipka, 1984, 5)
> Ambiguous definitions of the construct . . . have plagued self-esteem research. (Harter, 1990, 365)
> There are many problems in most of the studies on self-concept development in Afro-American children that have made it difficult to reach some basic conclusions, . . . not the least of which have been . . . different definitions of self-concept. (Powell, 1985, 146)

Although the term *self-esteem* seems almost intuitively obvious, this is perhaps one of the reasons it is so difficult to define: its meaning is subject to many conscious and unconscious beliefs and values we hold about what is desirable and what is not. Thus, what one person regards as an essential part of a healthy, well-functioning individual, may be seen and felt quite differently by someone who holds different values. What one person believes to be low self-esteem may be viewed as resistance to cultural expectations by another. For instance, while some researchers have discussed early pregnancy as a symptom of low self-esteem, researchers T. Robinson and J. V. Ward point out that for African American young women, pregnancy may be a strategy that "can be viewed as an act of resistance to a society that has deemed her of little use and value" (1991, 95). In addition, dropping out of school has been linked in many people's minds with low self-esteem. Michelle Fine (1988), however, has observed that during the first six months after dropping out of school, young people are often less depressed than the norm.

Currently, there is growing consensus among researchers that self-esteem is an image of self made up of factors that include academic competence, social acceptance, parental approval, and appearance. Each of these factors,

however, plays a larger or smaller role in an individual's self-esteem, depending on the value each individual places on these various areas. For instance, a young woman's self-concept, or her idea of who she is, may include the fact that she performs badly in school, but if she does not place much value on school performance, she may still have high self-esteem, in accordance with her value judgment of her idea of self.

The mutability of what self-esteem is makes measuring it problematic, especially quantitatively: more than 200 tests have been designed and used (Adler, 1992, 48). Because different people place emphasis on different abilities and qualities, it is not valid to measure specific aspects of experience—school, appearance, family relations, and so forth—without weighting them for the value each person places on them. And though most tests ask respondents to rate their agreement with a statement like "Overall I like myself," this can lead to other problems. For instance, Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan have reported that men tend to place more value on areas in which they do well, while women tend to see such areas as less important (Tschirhart Sanford & Donovan, 1984, 17). Therefore, socialized modesty, like other related cultural values, may make it difficult for some groups to overcome internalized aversion to general statements of satisfaction with themselves.

An additional problem in self-esteem research is that researchers are usually trying to show a relationship between self-esteem and another factor. Unfortunately, most often we do not know whether a problem is *caused* by low self-esteem or whether low self-esteem is a *result* of the problem. For instance, the California Task Force on Self-Esteem sponsored a study on self-esteem and its relation to a number of social problems they identified, including school failure, child abuse, and violence. While some relationship was found to exist for several of the issues they researched, most of these researchers cautioned readers against drawing conclusions of cause and effect. Likewise, a study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found a "circular relationship" rather than a cause-and-effect relationship between high self-esteem, a liking for math and science, and higher career interests (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 15). Therefore, we do not know whether liking math (and the probable link to success in this subject area) raises self-esteem for girls or whether girls with high self-esteem are more prone to like math. Thus, we must be careful to avoid making mistaken

cause-and-effect assumptions about research data based on our wishes to have those data support our perspectives.

Another issue as we attempt to explore gender as an element of identity and its relation to self-esteem is that a multicultural approach to research and analysis has yet to become a real part of self-esteem studies. Most of the research, if it includes gender breakdowns, does not consider how social class, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual preference, and so on, may affect girls. Despite several studies showing significant differences among females across race and class, most still discuss a "female" experience without recognizing the diversity of experiences within this category. Worse, sometimes these other demographics are considered distractions. For example, in a recent study designed to test how the timing of transition to middle school or high school affects levels of self-esteem, the researchers concluded that gender was a critical factor, that girls' self-esteem was affected more negatively by early change to large, impersonal schools than boys'. In the introduction to this study, however, the researchers explain that African American students were dropped from the study because of sample-control factors, and that participating schools could not have a heavy concentration of Spanish speakers. Researchers draw a number of conclusions about gender issues related to their topic, but base these conclusions on a study of only White girls and boys (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Future research must discard the perception that White middle-class experience defines the norm, and recognize that the category of gender does not exclude race, ethnicity, ability, class, or other factors.

Finally, while studying issues of self-esteem in women, it is important to remember that the discussion takes place very much within a context of Western, North American/European values and ideas. Thus, essentialism with regard to selfhood, the idea that self has meaning removed from context, is a particularly Western notion. Dorinne K. Kondo, in a recent study of gender and self in Japanese society, explores the cultural implications of defining self, finding that the idea that qualities of self exist unrelated to context is alien to many non-Western societies. For example, Kondo writes about how the Japanese word for *self* varies according to the context one is in and the image one wants to convey. One word may emphasize an egalitarian relationship between those talking, while another may emphasize a hierarchy; one word may be used in a formal setting, while another may be

used in the home. This language is indicative of a view of self that is contextually defined: "Boundaries between self and other are fluid and constantly changing, depending on context and on the social positioning people adopt in particular situations" (Kondo, 1990, 31–32). Kondo points out that while Carol Gilligan and others find major gender differences in the ways White middle-class U.S. females and males identify themselves (e.g., relational definitions of self for females and autonomous definitions for males), these differences appear small when compared with differences between Western and non-Western understandings of self.

In looking at self-esteem, one must inevitably consider definitions of self. If we imagine a continuum, at one end would be a society in which self is defined only in its relation to other entities, and does not have meaning outside of them. On the other end would be a society that defines self as a separate entity unaffected by outside contexts or influences. As one moves farther along the continuum toward total individualism, self-esteem becomes easier to understand and a more important concept in understanding how that culture works. Therefore, when examining self-esteem issues in this society, we must be aware of where we are on the continuum. Further, we must recognize that different cultures within the United States fall at different places along this continuum.

What does all of this mean? We must remember several things as we look at and use research: (a) that definitions and measures of self-esteem used by researchers have been far from consistent, (b) that these definitions and measures have often failed to recognize how culturally based the concept is and to take into account the implications of this factor for working in a multicultural society, and (c) that these same definitions and measures have generally not been sensitive to the ways various identities intertwine to form our self-concept. Many investigations and analyses have been framed as if we could chop up identity into gender or race or sexual preference, and so on, without considering how all of these elements relate to and affect one another. Finally, to understand and define the amorphous concept of self-esteem from a multicultural perspective, we need individual reflection in order to be conscious of our own socialization concerning how we define and value ourselves, and we need to work with others who come with differing experiences.

Race, Class, and Other Identities in Young Women's Search for Self

Gender is an extremely important part of identity in our culture and every other. From birth, parents and others treat boy and girl babies differently and hold different expectations for them. Boys and girls learn from a very young age to incorporate what society defines as appropriate and valued for that gender, within that individual's race, ethnic, and class context.

As young women enter adolescence, however, we see in this country many signals of developmental turmoil. Numerous researchers examining gender have found that as a group, young women show increasing self-doubts and diminishing self-esteem during this time. While boys also show a slight drop in self-esteem during this period, girls start out lower and drop much farther than boys. When we attempt to explore the issue further, however, we find that we are just at the beginning stages of gathering data that would allow us to look at self-esteem through a multicultural lens. Researchers have for the most part looked only at gender, with some significant research that incorporates race into an otherwise gender-only analysis. Many researchers have called for further work that is more representative of the pluralism found within females. As Harriette Pipes McAdoo states, "Too often stereotypic attitudes blind us [into] looking only at one segment of young women of color, those who are in poverty. . . . We must look separately at the needs of Black girls who are from families who are middle-class, who are working class, and who are in poverty" (cited in Valentine Foundation, 1990, 8).

An example of research that considers race in a study of young women is a recent report sponsored by the AAUW. This study found that levels of self-esteem vary widely among Black, Latina, and White teenage girls. Researchers found that Latinas report the highest levels of self-esteem among girls in elementary school, but then experience the greatest drop in self-esteem of all groups—38 points out of 100—although not to levels as low as those experienced by White girls. White girls start out and end with the lowest self-esteem, dropping 33 points. African American girls, on the other hand, show a much different pattern. They start out with slightly lower levels of self-esteem than Latinas, but drop only 7 points and end with a

markedly higher level of self-esteem than Latina or White girls (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 9).

Researcher Geneva Gay (1978) raises issues about how the development of racial identity influences that of gender identity. She writes that during early adolescence, young people of color begin to consciously examine their ethnic and racial identity, and may also begin to compare themselves and their group against other groups. Gay found that often the dominant culture's views of femininity and masculinity do not accommodate diverse racial and ethnic groups; that is, what may be seen as appropriate gender-role behavior in one racial or ethnic group may not be seen as such within the dominant culture. This finding is supported by Johnella E. Butler's work (1989), which points out that behaviors that help a young woman within her ethnic group may become "deficits" within the majority/dominant culture.

Researcher James K. Zimmerman has investigated biculturalism among Latinas and the role it plays in their development. He has identified a number of issues that strongly affect these young women, including conflicting expectations among the family, the ethnic community, and the dominant culture; a sense of isolation because of the family's rootedness in another culture; and sometimes contradictory expectations from parents who want a young woman to succeed in the dominant culture, but also to retain traditional cultural values and gender-role characteristics that seem to conflict with the young woman's ability to do so (1991, 223–40).

A recent book by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) examines girls who are from mainly privileged racial and class backgrounds—White middle- and upper-class girls in a private school. At age nine, most of these girls are able to express feelings and conflicting opinions to family and friends. By ages twelve and thirteen, however, many are unable to identify and talk about their feelings and have incorporated a way of knowing that covers over their own needs and opinions—their "voice," as Gilligan and colleagues call it. These researchers have found that as these young women increasingly experience silencing from adults, especially connected with what is considered "appropriate" gender-role behavior, girls stop expressing many feelings. While this experience should not be generalized to all females, this study and others by the Harvard Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls do give important insights into White middle- and upper-class young women's issues. This kind of in-depth study, however, has

not been conducted with a multiracial or multiethnic group of young people, or with other classes of young women.

Overall, we do not have much self-esteem research that considers class and compares across class lines. Wendy Luttrell looked at how race and class influence adult women's view of education and work, a study that suggests interesting directions for self-esteem work. In a study of adult African American and White working-class women, she found that African American working-class women were able to claim "real intelligence"—knowledge gained from experiences and feelings, as opposed to schools—both for themselves and for the men in their lives. White women, however, spoke of only men as having "real intelligence," and negated the value of women's common sense. Luttrell tied this finding to African American women's stronger sense of community and to their knowledge that their work is important to their families, qualities largely gained from a continuous individual and community struggle against racism. White working-class women, however, viewed themselves and their knowledge as individually learned, and their work as less important than men's (Luttrell, 1989).

Researchers have only just begun to explore how sexual orientation affects self-esteem. There is evidence that youth who identify themselves as lesbians are at increased risk for feelings of isolation and for suicide (Hunter, cited in Schultz, 1991, 4). Homophobia, including mental and physical abuse, from friends, family, and others not only places them at risk for low self-esteem but also isolates them from others who could help.

Similar issues arise for young women with disabilities. Though research has been scant, activist Harilyn Rousso states that these young women are often isolated, having little contact with other young women like them from whom they could gain support. Rousso and psychologist Beth Zemsky point out that unlike most youth oppressed because of race and/or class, females with disabilities or who are lesbian or bisexual often do not have parents or other family members to turn to who can identify with and provide support to them from a position of shared experience (cited in Flansburg, 1991, 2).

These studies open up many avenues for future work, and emphasize our need for more work that integrates race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and ability into self-esteem work. The next sections will touch on some of the areas in which gender issues affect young women as adolescents in this

culture—to a greater or lesser degree and in different ways, depending on their racial, ethnic, social class, and other identities—and which strongly influence their identity development.

The Role of Sexism in Self-Esteem

Several recent studies have highlighted the link between women's self-esteem and their experiences with sexism, showing that the extent to which a woman values herself is clearly affected by how much her community and society value her and others like her. Among those addressing these ties are the AAUW-sponsored survey of students (Greenberg-Lake, 1991), Tschirhart Sanford and Donovan's (1984) comprehensive look at how sexism touches women's lives and affects their self-esteem, and Gloria Steinem's (1992) book on self-esteem from a feminist perspective. In the following sections, I will briefly describe some of the ways sexism touches young women's lives as they enter adolescence and the ways this experience may influence their feelings about themselves.

Violence

> I remember the fear, being scared to walk to Baba's, our grandmother's house, because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness—those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate. Even when empty or vacant those porches seemed to say danger, you do not belong here, you are not safe.
>
> —bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

Gender-based violence is part of a frightening number of young women's lives, and those who don't experience it themselves are strongly affected by the threat of it. As researcher Denise Gamache states, "Individuals and groups use violence to establish or maintain systems of power and control over others. Violence is easier to justify and more socially tolerated when directed at 'appropriate' victims, that is, those viewed by the culture as deserving of this treatment. . . . Any challenge to those in power is viewed as a threat to the natural order, with violence likely to be used in its defense" (1991, 70–71).

Educator and writer bell hooks describes in the opening quotation the terror she felt as a girl growing up in the segregated South when she had to move through areas in which she clearly was not wanted, was in physical danger. As an African American young woman, hooks was in danger of

violent attack both because of her race and her gender. Many women, of all races (and especially women of color, because of the threat of racist attacks), might use similar words to describe their feelings as they move in public spaces in this country—city streets, public buildings, subways, school yards. As adolescent girls begin to explore their surroundings, most begin to absorb a message that as females, they do not have the freedom to move in places males do, and that when they do, it is with the permission of males. Many places—such as city streets, parks, and bars—are considered unrespectable or unsafe for single women, yet perfectly normal for single men. When accompanied by an appropriate male (i.e., generally one of the same race as the female and accepted in that setting), a woman can feel much safer in most of these same places.

In many cases, as boys grow older they are allowed—and encouraged—to explore their streets, their neighborhoods, and even farther. Young women are seldom given this freedom. They begin to hear a message that streets are dangerous for women, and they discover this fact through subtle and not-so-subtle indicators that males are in control—through experiences ranging from street harassment to rape and other violence. As young men their same age are encouraged to explore public areas, young women hear warnings about the violence—unfortunately, real—and what people will think of young women who roam too much. Disabled young women are especially likely to hear these warnings from parents, and to be victims of street crimes (Access Oregon, 1990).

In a study by Cheryl Benard and Edith Schlaffer, street hassling was found to be widespread throughout Western societies. These researchers found that the street is "the place where societies have always taken care to clearly mark the lines of order and status. . . . Harassment is a way of ensuring that women will not feel at ease, that they will remember their role as sexual beings available to men and not consider themselves equal citizens participating in public life" (quoted in Tschirhart Sanford & Donovan, 1984, 268–69). These actions show who is in control of the space and who is a guest, who is comfortable there and who does not have a right to be.

In addition, women are often considered in some way responsible for being attacked if they are on the street at the wrong time of day or in the wrong area (Chancer, 1991, 290–91). White men in our country do not experience this type of blame, except in very rare circumstances (Tschirhart

Sanford & Donovan, 1984, 268). This is true both in public opinion and in the views of men who assault women. A study of men convicted of committing gang rape found that most of the men felt that because a woman was on the street alone at night, for whatever reason, she was either signaling her sexual availability to them or was a prostitute and thus had no rights (Sculley, 1990, 156).

Even our system of etiquette, which for the most part is taught as children grow into adolescence and which is stronger in middle- and upper-class families, places men firmly in control of public (and private) spaces, treating women as guests—opening doors for them, walking on the outside to protect them from splashes from the street. While these gestures can feel nice to young women, what they signal to both females and males is that men are in charge of the public arena, and must protect women.

Though violence by strangers is often the most visible type of violence in the public mind—and the type of violence society most warns young women of—this visibility often minimizes the type of violence that many females have already experienced or will experience: abuse and assault by someone they know. There is growing recognition of violence against adult women by their partners—beatings and assaults by husbands or boyfriends are the leading cause of injury for women living in the United States (Stark & Flitcraft, 1989). Only recently, however, has there been awareness that this type of violence is a problem among adolescents as well. From research studies, we know that approximately one in ten teenagers experiences violence in dating relationships (Gamache, 1991, 73). And in one study, 26 percent of pregnant teens said they were in a relationship in which their partner was physically hurting them; 40 to 60 percent of these young women said the violence began or escalated during pregnancy (McFarlane, 1991).

Emotional abuse, which is part of a continuum that directly links harassment and verbal slurs with rape and murder, and which can exist alone but is also almost always present when physical abuse is evident, is often aimed at damaging young women's self-esteem. Women who have experienced partner violence say emotional abuse is not only the hardest type of abuse to identify but also the form of abuse that has the most impact on their lives and their views of themselves (Worcester, 1993, 4). By making a young woman feel worthless and unable to act independently, her male partner can work to ensure that she stays in the relationship and complies

with his demands. As Gamache explains, "Frequently the girl is told, 'No one else will ever want you.' . . . It is very confusing for the victim to be told she is worthless by the same person expressing great love for her. . . . The degradation, humiliation and disrespect attack the girl's feeling of self-worth" (1991, 75).

In addition to violence by male partners, violence, including sexual abuse and assault, within the family is a widespread problem. Statistics show that one in three to four girls will be sexually abused by the time she reaches eighteen (Russell, 1983). And research studies show that as much as 60 percent of all sexual abuse inflicted on minors is done by family members or by a person in a caretaking role (Russell, 1984).

This continuum of violence that women are exposed to based on their gender, combined with violence based on their race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, and other identities, works to damage self-esteem, keep many young women in traditional gender roles that emphasize dependence, and isolate them from connections with other women or other caring people.

Schools and Education

Schools play a profound role in the development and maintenance of students' self-esteem. For many teenagers, and especially young women, academic self-esteem makes up a large part of their global self-esteem (Greenberg-Lake, 1991). One of the major findings of AAUW's recent survey is that "for elementary school girls, in fact, academic self-esteem is the most important aspect of self-esteem; yet, it is for them already a negative force. Less than half the girls in elementary school (42 percent) say they feel pride in their schoolwork and the percentage drops 32 points to 12 percent in high school" (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 11).

The same survey found that family and schools have a stronger part than peers in adolescents' self-esteem and aspirations, and that teachers have an especially important role in young women's self-esteem: "For young women, feelings about academic performance correlate strongly with relationships with teachers. Teachers are important role models for young women. Nearly three out of four elementary school girls and over half of high school girls want to be teachers" (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 11).

Sexism in schools and differential outcomes for girls have already been widely studied and established (see AAUW, 1992, for a recent review of the literature).. Charol Shakeshaft observes that "the average female is ignored—neither reprimanded nor praised. . . . [Girls] learn that, if they do well in school, it is because they are lucky or work hard, not because they are smart or capable. The interactions of teachers with students reinforce the societal message that females are inferior" (Shakeshaft, 1986, 501).

As carriers of societal values, schools model and teach—often unconsciously, but sometimes consciously—the sexist, racist, and classist values of the dominant U.S. culture. For instance, while teachers are primarily White women, school administrators are primarily White men (Lynch, 1990). And while the numbers and percentage of students of color are increasing, the numbers of teachers of color are decreasing (Nieto, 1992, 57). Curricula focus on the accomplishments of men (usually White), while many of the "special" needs of girls—for specialized health clinics, teen pregnancy/child care services, psychological services (for higher reportings of depression and thoughts of suicide), and other "evaded curricula"—are not included in most educational institutions (AAUW, 1992). Teachers spend more time with and use teaching styles that are most successful with White middle-class male students (Sadker & Sadker, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1986). And though teachers think girls are better students, they tend to attribute boys' failures to motivation and girls' to ability. Finally, because of differential ways in which praise and criticism are given to girls in the classroom, girls eventually begin to internalize criticism as personal failure, while paying little attention to praise (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson & Enna, 1978). In addition, recent work has documented sexual harassment in the schools, most commonly from male students (Linn et al., 1992).

Young women of color face racism in addition to sexism. When African American girls perform as well as White boys, teachers often assume White boys are not working up to their potential (Daminco & Scott, cited in AAUW, 1992). Many other differential treatments and expectations in schools have been documented for African American girls. In addition to teacher-student interaction patterns and curricula that often minimize African American contributions, Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu (1986) have found that because schools have been dominated and controlled by Whites, many African Americans feel that to succeed in schools is to abandon their racial

ties. The African American students these researchers studied were often forced to choose between connection to and support from their African American peers and doing well in school, with the result that most of these students had either to distance themselves from the academic side of school or to break from their circle of African American friends at a time when connection to peers is vital.

Widespread tracking in schools often places young women of color and low-income females, like their male counterparts, in low tracks, which often become self-fulfilling paths for failure and/or alienation from academics. Because of differential curricula, teacher preparation and experience, resources, classroom climate, and student expectations, this practice fosters "lower self-esteem and lower educational aspirations for low track students" (Gay, 1993, 180). In addition, because of race and class segregation in our communities, some entire schools function as "high" and "low" tracks, evidencing many of the characteristics and results exhibited by within-school tracking (Wheelock, 1992, 9).

Added together, these facts point to schools' strong role in socializing girls into a world that ignores females' contributions and focuses more on males' issues and needs. There is much evidence that though schools and educators have a powerful potential to help girls face an inhospitable society and maintain their self-esteem, they are most often not tapping this potential.

Public and Private Discourse

Deborah Tannen has explored differences in the ways men and women use language, showing that women—at least White middle-class women—are socialized to a more "private" way of using language, whereas men develop a more public manner of speaking. The women she studied showed a greater facility for talking and relating to other individuals, for sharing feelings and experiences, and for supporting others' attempts to do the same—the kind of talking they practice more with small groups and in familial settings. Men, on the other hand, were more comfortable speaking to groups, expressing their opinions and pushing their points, and talking about ideas and issues rather than feelings—the kind of talking they practice more in public settings like school classrooms (Tannen, 1990).

While Tannen does an excellent job of documenting different ways of speaking, linguist Robin Lakoff takes these differences and explores reasons for them. She proposes that these differences developed as separate languages for the powerful and the less powerful. Those who are used to control and power can speak directly, without the fear of giving offense. Women speak a language designed to avoid confronting those in power, but instead intended to persuade and to avoid giving the impression that power is being fought for (Lakoff, cited in Tavris, 1992, 297–98). We see examples of this in some men's complaints that with the visibility sexual harassment is currently receiving, they feel gender relations in the workplace have suffered, because they feel more constrained in what they can discuss and make jokes about. These comments clearly come from people who are used to a language of power, who, unlike most women, haven't had to think about how their words may affect others.

Lakoff discusses how females become bilingual, developing an ability to speak one way with men and another way with women, much like other oppressed groups in the United States must learn, in addition to the ways of their own culture, to understand and interact with the White middle class (Lakoff, cited in Tavris, 1992, 298). Other studies have shown that women use a different manner of speaking with one another than they use when interacting with men or with a mixed group. Thus, rather than a "male" way of speaking and a "female" way of speaking, these differences reflect a dominant role and a subordinate role—something with which adolescents, as they begin to take on a more active role among peers and with institutions, come face to face.

Eleanor Maccoby studied gender segregation in childhood and adolescent activities, finding that children at age four and a half spend three times as much playtime with children of their own sex as they do with the other sex, and that children at age six and a half spend eleven times as much playtime with children of the same sex. Although as they mature, young women begin to spend more time with young men, they still spend most of their social time with other young women. Maccoby has found that as they grow older, girls become more "polite" in their requests to other children and more passive in their interactions with boys. Boys, on the other hand, develop a style in which they progressively make more direct commands and become less responsive to polite requests and girls' prohibitions; while they will

modify behavior based on other boys' requests, they are not affected by girls' requests. Maccoby hypothesizes that it is because of boys' growing unresponsiveness to girls that girls begin to prefer same-sex groups, where their concerns are heard and acted on (Maccoby, 1990, 515). Maccoby believes that much of the manner of speaking and interacting that is formed in same-sex groups during childhood affects social ability and influence in teen years. She argues that when young people begin interacting across sex on a more regular basis, young women begin to experience more instances of a type of talk in which they feel neither validated nor understood.

A study by M. A. Hogg and J. C. Turner found that one of the common forms of public discourse still taught in schools has very different effects on young men and young women: after a staged debate, young men's self-esteem rose and young women's fell. In another staged interaction, in which young women and men were to get acquainted with each other, the males most often controlled the pace of the interaction and the young women followed the males' lead. In interviews afterward, though women admitted adapting themselves to this relationship, they also reported feeling uncomfortable about not being in control of the encounter, and did not enjoy it as much as males said they did (Hogg & Turner, 1987, and Davis, 1978, both cited in Maccoby, 1990, 518).

Thus, when young women increasingly encounter situations in which their way of speaking and relating to others is not validated and the dominant discourse is male, many find it increasingly hard to make their feelings and opinions heard. As their opinions and requests are increasingly ignored, young women come to understand that most of their beliefs do not matter to the public as much as young men's, whether in the classroom, the family, or another setting.

The Developing Female Body

> They were disclosing her secret shame: her body was changing. The girl she had been back home in Spanish was being shed. In her place—almost as if the boys' ugly words and taunts had the power of spells—was a hairy, breast-budding grownup no one would ever love. . . . How she wished she could wrap her body up the way she'd heard Chinese girls had their feet bound so

they wouldn't grow big. She would stay herself, a quick, skinny girl with brown eyes and a braid down her back, a girl she had just begun to feel could get things in this world.

—Carla, speaking in Julia Alvarez's
How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents

A study by the Kinsey Institute found that women in the United States have more negative feelings about their bodies than women from any other culture studied (Faludi, 1991, 202). It is at the beginning of adolescence when most of these feelings begin appearing, at the very time when bodies begin developing from girls' into women's.

A teenage girl learns about her body in many ways, most of which do not tell her good things about it. Iris Marion Young has written about some of the societal influences that shape a female's perception of her body and its capabilities. Young proposes that because girls are not encouraged to take risks with their bodies, are not encouraged to participate in strenuous sports, their play is more sedentary and enclosing than boys' and they grow more and more distant from their bodies. Young also discusses how women's bodies are seen in parts—in advertisements, on television, and in movies—as objects of adoration, violence, and other actions by outside forces. From this, young women begin to develop a self-consciousness that involves looking at themselves from outside of their bodies (Young, 1990, 154–55).

Researchers have found that young women in this country are much more concerned with looks than young men are. Quite the contrary of selfish vanity, this concern is often destructive and problematic. One research study found that in junior high school, 30 percent of the females, as opposed to 12 percent of the males, had a negative body image. In high school, this rose to 40 percent of the females, compared with only 15 percent of the males. This same study also found that three times as many girls as boys of average body weight thought they were overweight, and that 65 percent of the high school girls were at moderate to high risk for developing eating disorders (Harris, Blum & Resnick, 1991, 120–21).

Although girls report being on diets at younger and younger ages, most problems of negative body image and eating disorders begin at adolescence for girls. Girls are born with more body fat than boys, and adolescence is the first period in a female's life when the percentage increases even more, a change

vital to healthy menstruation and ability to bear children. And while boys see their changing bodies as growing stronger and better, girls by and large see these changes as negative and often as sources of shame (Gilday, 1990; Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 7).

When, at the beginning of adolescence, girls' bodies start changing, young women often view this healthy transition as their bodies being "out of control." A number of young women with anorexia interviewed in a documentary by Katherine Gilday use these very words when remembering this period in their development (Gilday, 1990).

Because most of the changes happening in girls' bodies during early adolescence are connected with their budding sexuality, the U.S. culture's difficulties regarding females and sexuality become acute in this moment. Boys and men often feel freedom to comment on the young woman's sexuality. She becomes aware of doctors' and the law's control over aspects of her body, and her increasing powerlessness over it. She begins to hear conflicting speeches from family, school, politicians, and television, telling her, with little attention to boys' roles and responsibilities, that it is her responsibility to stop boys from having sex with her.

Michele Fine (1988) has found that discourse in the area of female adolescent sexuality is almost exclusively focused on victimization, disease, and morality; little is said to girls about positive aspects of sexuality. Fine, Deborah Tolman, and Judith V. Jordan have all written about the positive aspects of female sexuality—connection, desire, and so on—that are missing from what the schools, and many families, discuss with young women (Tolman, 1991; Jordan, 1987).

For young lesbian women, the question of sexuality is even more complicated. They find little to help them even name their sexual feelings, and face isolation and violence if they do come out. The mean age of lesbians' realization and naming of their sexual orientation is fourteen, just at the edge of adolescence (Zemsky, 1991, 186). Social worker Joyce Hunter points out that U.S. society puts tremendous pressure on young lesbians to hide their sexual orientation, and tends to force them into isolation, just at a time when connection and support are needed (Hunter, cited in Schultz, 1991, 14). Bisexual young women and those who feel unsure about their sexuality may feel similar pressures, but unfortunately, almost no research on this issue has been done with them.

Many women active in disability rights, including therapist Harilyn Rousso, have discussed how disabled females are denied sexual feelings and actions. Though numerous disabilities have no effect on sex drive or capabilities, any physical disability is assumed by the majority culture to limit both interest and ability (Rousso, 1990). In a review of research, Deborah L. Schultz found that "a focus on disabled girls leads to inevitable confrontation with cultural representations of the adolescent female body and sexuality. Issues of self-esteem and 'normal' development for all girls are thrown into relief. The culture conveys the message that girls who are not going to develop 'normally' barely have a right to exist" (Schultz, 1991, 12–13).

Thus, in many ways it would be unusual for a young woman growing up in this society to feel good about her body and her new sexuality. Bombarded with female body images and beauty ideals that are unattainable, and discussion of sex that is couched only in terms of prohibitions, dangers, and illnesses, most young women find it difficult to claim and love their bodies and sexuality.

Media Representations and Influences

The media—including television, movies, radio, newspapers, and magazines—have a profound influence on our views of society and ourselves. Endless studies and lengthy writings have explored the effects of media messages on individuals and communities, and much discussion has concerned media objectification of women and the lack of representation of females and of diverse female experiences (Young, 1990; Davies, Dickey, & Stratford, 1987; Dworkin, 1991).

bell hooks has written about how media depict African American women as either "mammy or slut," with their bodies objectified even more by movies and television than White women's (1992). Researcher Gordon Berry's findings support this observation, documenting that when women of color are shown on television, a disproportionate number of them appear as victims of crimes and violence (Berry, 1982, 326).

Television is the most powerful medium in the public conscience, and because of its current inability to present depth or complexity in characterization or stories, is also the medium that relies most on stereotypes of women (as well as others) to communicate. Gordon Berry has called

television "a communicator of the society and its values" (Berry, 1982, 329). He cites studies by a number of groups that show television plays a significant role in the socialization of children. "These researchers noted that children often change their attitudes about people and activities to reflect those encountered in television programs" (Leifer et al., cited in Berry, 1982, 323). This fact is important when we consider that more than 95 percent of U.S. homes have televisions, and that one study found that, among low-income youth, African American teenagers watched more than six hours of television a day and White teenagers watched more than four hours of television a day (Comstock, cited in Berry, 1982, 319–20).

On May 1, 1991, the *New York Times* ran a story reporting that networks had canceled the last children's show that had a leading female character. Why? Because executives believed that while girls will watch a television show with a male lead, boys will not do the reverse (cited in Dworkin, 1991). In addition, several studies by Sally Steenland for the National Commission on Working Women of WOW (Wider Opportunities for Women) have found that male characters outnumber female characters in every age-group except children under thirteen—girls under thirteen make up 7 percent of all female characters and boys under thirteen make up 4 percent of all male characters (cited in Schultz, 1991, 16).

Though overall representation of women has improved somewhat over the past two decades, female characters are still stereotyped as victims, wives, girlfriends, and mothers. It is still much less common to see women as protagonists, as shapers of their own fate, than it is to see men in this position. There have been a few exceptions, including shows like "Cagney and Lacey," "Murphy Brown," and "Designing Women," although these programs showcase only White female leads. Television still provides, at best, only token representation of women of color.

In movies, similar issues appear. Recent "hit" movies have for the most part depicted women only as mothers or love interests. We have seen some exceptions, mainly from the women who have entered the movie business as scriptwriters, directors, and producers. Among them are *Gas, Food, and Lodging; Mississippi Masala; Desert Hearts; Fried Green Tomatoes;* and *Thelma and Louise.* All have female leads who struggle against limitations imposed on them by sexism, racism, and/or classism (with an interesting commonality that to greater or lesser degrees, happy endings come only

through divorcing oneself from White male culture—through friendships, lovers, or death). Most of these films, however, have not made the "mega-hit" list.

Film critic Kathi Maio writes that though the number of female leads has grown since the 1960s and 1970s, sexism in the depiction of women grew during the 1980s. As part of a backlash against women's expansion out of traditional mother and wife roles, the films of the 1980s show career women as psychologically unstable, sexually frustrated, and unhappy, as women who only need a good man and marriage to fulfill them (Maio, 1988, 5–7).

The music industry is another powerful medium that plays an important role in many adolescents' lives. The music teens listen to and the videos they watch contain many notable examples of sexism and violence. Racism has led much of the discussion to focus on a few rap groups. But much of the popular music aimed at teenagers is loaded with sexist images. Rock music, and especially heavy metal (whose fans are, coincidentally, mainly White teenage boys), contains as many examples as rap of violence against and objectification of women. Country music, a genre much listened to by teens in some parts of the country, also contains stereotypical images of women and men.

Without trying to document the multitude of sources in the media that give distorted pictures of women, and depict women primarily as cheerleaders for men or victims of crime (the latter often tied to failure to fulfill the former role), it is evident that adolescent girls find it difficult to see themselves or find positive role models in media representations. Young women of color and working-class and poor women see few, and primarily negative, images of people of their race and class. Young women with disabilities are almost nonexistent in television and movies, and when present, are generally depicted as either victims or psychopaths. Lesbian women experience a similar media treatment. Thus, in an area that powerfully reflects and influences popular perspectives, young women again face sexist images, and exclusion or distortion of visions of females who are not White, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual.

Developing Resistance and Resilience

The preceding section showed some of the many ways in which our society puts young women at risk for low self-esteem. This section will examine the other ingredient in the equation of self-esteem: ways in which some young women hear these messages, analyze them, and resist them in order to promote healthy self-esteem.

Naming and Externalizing Bias

Several studies suggest that self-esteem may be helped by being able to identify and discuss societal biases, similar to what Paolo Freire called *conscientization* (Freire, 1971). Freire used this term when looking at class oppression in Latin America; research supporting the approach has been seen in this country in studies centering on race, and especially in studies of African Americans. Phillip J. Bowman and Cleopatra Howard (1985) found that a majority of African American teenagers and young adults—62 percent—reported that their families had transmitted messages to them about being African American. These messages ranged from discussion of ethnic pride or commitment to their community to transmitting knowledge about racial barriers or interracial protocol. African American young women were slightly less likely to receive these messages than African American young men (41 percent of the young women received no messages, as opposed to 36 percent of the young men), but a significant percentage of both sexes experienced this exchange of information within the family.

Bowman and Howard propose that families in which the parent or parents are able to offer proactive suggestions for overcoming racial barriers and emphasize self-development and individual achievement create children with the highest levels of "personal efficacy." These researchers also conclude that the discussion of barriers and ways to deal with them helps young people "distinguish between their own 'self' image and the 'role' imposed by society" (1985, 139).

Other scholars have studied and written about the important role the African American family plays in positive socialization of children. For example, Janie Victoria Ward concludes that "Black families prepare black children for the onslaught of negation they must endure by providing the

positive feelings and self-confidence underlying what it means to be a black person and a member of the black race" (Ward, 1989, 222). bell hooks writes about positive messages given to her personally by her Southern community: "I was continually told that I was 'special' in those settings, that I would be 'somebody' someday and do important work to 'uplift' the race. I felt loved and cared about in the segregated black community of my growing up. It gave me the grounding in a positive experience of 'blackness' that sustained me when I left that community to enter racially integrated settings, where racism informed most social interactions" (1992, 44).

Ward (1989) writes about a longitudinal study in which she conducted interviews with a group of African American young women as part of a larger study of adolescent women. Ward found that family played a critical role in these young women's ability to deal with racist experiences. In fact, she found that all of the young women she interviewed used the family context as a means for identifying and discussing racist experiences they endured: "Parents had the task of interpreting the incident for the child, explaining the confusing and painful aspects of being singled out and demeaned" (222). Several of the young women described instances in which they brought home incidents of racist experiences and parents helped them to dissect and review the role race plays in the United States. Family also helped them develop ways of looking at and dealing with these incidents: "Students described sophisticated coping techniques that were developed to help the child make sense of painful personal attacks and maintain self-worth and value. . . . Thus when messages of White society say 'you can't,' the well-functioning black family and community stand ready to counter such messages with those that say, 'you can, we have, we will' (223). Tracy Robinson and Ward (1991) recommend that counselors help African American young women channel their resistance into positive areas when fighting against racism and sexism, including those areas which help them plan for their futures and connect to their communities.

The ability to name and externalize sexism is not something that White middle-class women often pass along to their children. Not only is sexism rarely spoken of, but girls observe adult women closely and see that often they don't speak out against sexism. Brown and Gilligan's book (1992), the latest work coming out of the Harvard Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls, documents these observations of young women

and a process in middle- and upper-class White girls' development wherein their ability to identify feelings and differentiate their needs from others' expectations of them rapidly diminishes between the ages of nine and thirteen.

Brown and Gilligan find that these girls face a societal expectation to be nice and avoid conflict, to give in to others' needs and bury their own. Around age nine, these girls are able to talk readily about competing needs and differing opinions, and to call attention to their needs when their voices are not being heard by friends or adults. Around ages ten and eleven, many girls identify a struggle between being "nice" and being true to themselves. Some talk about feeling like they are "going crazy." Many express opinions that anger and other strong feelings should be avoided, that they are dangerous. By ages twelve and thirteen, most of these young women have difficulty articulating their feelings and expressing beliefs different from those of their peers.

Brown and Gilligan found a direct relationship between these mostly White middle-class girls' increasing struggle to feel and name their feelings and differing views and adults', and especially women's, willingness and ability to truly hear what girls are saying. These girls are rewarded by adults, and eventually by peers, for suppressing their needs, giving in to others' desires, and not expressing strong emotions.

It may be as a result of this cyclic socialization that White middle- and upper-class women as a group have difficulty talking about societal biases and discrimination. A socialization of privilege based on their skin color—and, for some, class—allows many White women to at least partly identify with and benefit fr[illegible]ne dominant power structure. Thus, many may see themselves as having something to lose if they confront systemic bias. While most African American women learn early that they are not part of the power hierarchy, White women don't necessarily learn this, especially if they experience sexism only as an "undercover" bias, something faced only as limited expectations, denied voice, and so on, rather than blatant attacks and name-calling. These examples, as well as experiences of harassment and violence, are often felt as individual attacks, not attributable to or connected with societal structures and biases. The experience of community/family organization and support against racism for many African American young

women may help them see sexism, in addition to racism, as a societal fault rather than an individual fault.

In summary, one instrument of resistance—the naming and externalizing of societal bias—is a skill most often seen and used effectively in African American families and communities as a tool for combating racism. Studies, however, suggest that this skill may be used to help girls identify and discuss sexism they experience, and to develop coping skills and proactive methods for dealing with this bias. This work with sexism does not negate the need to talk about racism, heterosexism, ableism, and other biases; rather, all girls and young women, both those who may experience them and those who may perpetuate them, need to know about these issues and how to deal with them.

Transforming Schools for Multicultural History and Perspectives

Gloria Powell (1985) found that African American students in segregated southern schools had higher levels of self-esteem than African American students in desegregated schools or White students in either situation. Rather than attributing this finding to segregation, she attributed it to what she found inside segregated schools:

> When I walked into the hallways, auditoriums, and classrooms, all the Afro-American heroes were on the walls. . . . When I sat in on the American History course, I heard the students talk about George Washington in one breath and George Washington Carver in the next. The subject was American History, and the role of Afro-Americans in the history of this country was an integral part of the curriculum. There was no need for a separate Black Studies course so that an Afro-American student could learn about the role his [or her] ancestors had in shaping this country. Such material was part of American history and so it was in English, and the sciences and art and music! (291)

Powell concludes that a "multiethnic curriculum at the crucial time when a young person is trying to establish a self-concept is important" (309).

Supporting this research have been findings that bilingual programs that affirm students' native languages and cultures serve to foster higher self-

esteem among students participating in them than among similar students not participating in bilingual programs (Nieto, 1992; Prewitt-Díaz, 1983).

As others have traced the distancing and poor performance of many students of color and low-income students to invisibility in the curriculum and other forms of systemic discrimination, teacher trainer Cathy Nelson and historian Linda Kerber, both cited in the recent AAUW report, connect girls' falling self-esteem to negative messages about women and omission of women's contributions from school curricula. As Kerber postulates, "Lowered self-esteem is a perfectly reasonable conclusion if one has been subtly instructed that what people like oneself have done in the world has not been important and is not worth studying" (Nelson & Kerber, cited in AAUW, 1992, 67).

Since the omission and diminution of women's contributions to our history and the primarily male perspective we have in many subject areas are the result of a sexist view of the world, it is essential to transform what and how schools teach to make them multicultural and sex-fair in content and process. This transformation would avoid the many problems ignored or created when, for instance, a module on women's history is appended to an existing curriculum, or when an additional chapter on women's contributions is added to a textbook. With these approaches, the primarily White middle-class male structure and perspectives of most curricula are never identified or challenged. In addition, other issues—including teacher awareness; student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-parent interactions; school climate; and assessment and evaluation—are never addressed. Finally, by transforming the school to be truly multicultural and sex-fair, one avoids the all-too-common problem of women's history or women's contributions turning out to actually be White women's history or White women's contributions.

Johnnella E. Butler writes about using teaching about women of color as a transformation process in schools. She argues that by focusing on women of color, students and teachers learn more about women as a whole, about White women and women of color separately, and about how sexism interacts with racism, classism, and ethnocentricism. One of the goals of this kind of education, as Butler outlines, is a "concept of humanity emanating from a sense of self that is not abstract and totally individually defined . . . but

that is both abstract and concrete, individually and communally defined" (Butler, 1989, 153).

In sum, women's history and women's contributions are vital content areas in curricula and course offerings. In addition, schools need to challenge and transform the White middle-class male perspective that forms the structure, climate, and perspective of most schools to ensure not only that women are included in the curriculum but that the starting point and framework are multicultural. Curriculum content and the broader school structure have the potential to send a message to young women of all races, ethnicities, abilities, classes, and so on, that they are valued members of our society.

Connection with Community

Some researchers have found a connection between young women's self-esteem and their ability to feel part of a strong and supportive group. Tracy Robinson, Janie Victoria Ward, Beverly Jean Smith, and bell hooks all discuss how strong a role their community played in their growing up, and the support they gained from it. Relates Smith, "Surrounded by a large group of women: family, friends, and neighbors, I have always felt connected while acting alone" (1991, 146). Smith advocates helping African American young women build connections to their community as a way to aid them in developing a strong sense of self and a healthy resistance to the racist and sexist messages they hear from other quarters. bell hooks similarly describes the support she received from her segregated rural African American community: "Our segregated church and schools were places where we were affirmed. . . . I felt loved and cared about" (1992, 44).

This issue of connection to community and the role it plays in self-concept appears to be in part related to development of racial identity. Janet Helms (1993) has explored the development of racial identity in Blacks and Whites, finding that African Americans are far more likely than Whites, who often consider themselves "raceless," to develop a healthy racial identity. By their very existence, African Americans are exposed to racism, which means they must in some way examine their racial existence within a racist society. Helms and others postulate that identification with the African American

community and the ability to reach out to it for support and knowledge are important to a healthy racial identity.

Psychotherapist Beth Zemsky has observed similar situations among lesbian young women as well: "Young lesbians receive many, many messages that say being a lesbian is wrong and bad. If young women are able to resolve enough family issues or get out of the family, if they are able to find a community of support, they can often externalize the negative messages. This helps them build a very strong sense of self" (1991). Another study found that Catholics raised in non-Catholic neighborhoods have lower self-esteem than those raised in Catholic or mixed neighborhoods. The same pattern was found for Jews and Protestants (Rosenberg, 1962, cited in Powell, 1983, 295).

These facts do not mean that ethnic/racial and religious groups should live only in same-group neighborhoods. It does tell us, however, that the development of strong self-esteem is more common where there are others of similar background who share experiences. Besides offering a connection that strengthens the ability to name and externalize bias and to know one's cultural history, a community that shares basic values can provide additional help to adolescents who are struggling with identity and goals. A strong community can help youth both identify and learn from others who face similar challenges—especially in terms of racism, heterosexism, and ableism—and find a place where they learn they have something to give back to the community.

Helping young women either become or continue to be connected with their communities is especially important for young women whose families may not be in a position to understand and help them with coping mechanisms. As previously mentioned, many girls and young women with disabilities live in families in which no other member has a disability. There is often no one who, from a similar perspective, can discuss issues regarding the disability and strategies for facing challenges (Rousso, 1991). This situation can make girls with disabilities feel very isolated.

Encouraging young women to connect with various communities means the development of a number of strategies. It means schools can work with parents concerning not just the individual student but how schools can be more responsive to diverse communities. Gloria Powell (1983) found that African American schools helped African American students develop strong

self-esteem because in part "the mores and norms of the home are reinforced in the immediate community." There is obviously a difference here between schools reinforcing an African American community value of pride in African American contributions and history and their reinforcing a White community adherence to White supremacy. But values that promote tolerance and pride in diverse experiences are important to infuse in school systems and curricula.

Schools can take advantage of community resources. They can provide opportunities for students to hear of the dreams and accomplishments of community leaders. They can encourage volunteer or part-time paid work that supports and builds community strength and pride. They can take students to visit community centers. All of these actions should involve goals both of helping female and male students of various races, ethnicities, abilities, religions, and so on, to develop ties with others from similar backgrounds and of helping all students learn about the history, values, and resources of others with different experiences.

Role Models and Mentors

A strategy embedded in the previous three points, but worth mentioning separately, is the usefulness of role models and mentors in developing strong self-esteem. This is something Gloria Powell (1985, 311) identified as one of the positive features of segregated African American schools in the South, schools taught by mostly African American teachers: "There are readily identifiable adult models for the youth to incorporate into their sense of self."

Role models are most effective for young people when they have something in common with students—race, gender, family background, disability, or another quality. These individuals help young people who experience similar challenges and burdens to see others who have been successful in overcoming hardships. While mentors do not necessarily have to be of the same race, ethnicity, or gender, these commonalities can help. A study of cross-gender and cross-race mentoring relationships by Norma Mertz and colleagues (1987) found that the White men serving as mentors to different sex or race mentorees saw no problems or special challenges in this kind of relationship. All of the mentorees in these relationships, however,

felt they encountered a number of difficult issues regarding cross-sex and cross-race mentors.

This does not mean that cross-sex and cross-gender relationships cannot be positive experiences. But for self-esteem work, it may mean that a special effort should be made to provide young women with role models and mentors who can help them deal with same-sex, same-race issues. This is important for young women, who face challenges and barriers that aren't often addressed in schools or programs, and especially for those who face additional discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and/or ability. Other women, especially those who have encountered similar situations—for instance, a woman with a disability who has finished college and established a career—can say, "You can do it because I did it, and here are things that helped me as I was struggling."

Teachers themselves can serve as good role models. The 1990 study commissioned by the AAUW found that "teachers are important role models for young women . . . [and] teachers have a special opportunity to affect the self-esteem of their female students, and, by instilling confidence, to shape their interests and aspirations" (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 11).

High Expectations

Researchers Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan believe that for girls, expectations change as they get older. These researchers observe that while as children, girls are expected to do well in school, as they enter adolescence, these expectations change (Tschirhart Sanford & Donovan, 1984, 42). Indeed, in many families there is an increased emphasis from parents on success in relationships, even at the expense of academic or other types of success.

Carol Gilligan has also proposed—drawing from her work with mostly White middle- and upper-class young women—that expectations for girls and boys are very different: "As young boys are pressured to take on images of heroes, or super heroes, as the grail which informs their quest to inherit their birthright or their manhood, so girls are pressed at adolescence to take on images of perfection as the model of the pure or perfectly good woman: the woman whom everyone will promote and value and want to be with" (Gilligan, 1991, 24).

In contrast, bell hooks (1984) and others have written about how most African American young women are raised not to be perfect women but to be providers, both financial and emotional, for their families. Joyce Ladner states: "Black females are socialized by adult figures in early life to become strong, independent women who, because of precarious circumstances growing out of poverty and racism, might have to eventually become heads of their own households. Black mothers teach their female offspring to perform adult tasks, such as household chores, when they are still in their preadolescent years" (Ladner, 1979, 3, cited in Joseph & Lewis, 1981, 95). These expectations may help many African American women see themselves as capable of caring for themselves and a family, and promote their sense of responsibility.

A significant amount of research has shown that teacher expectations strongly influence student performance. In fact, as Myra Sadker and David Sadker conclude, "many studies show that when teachers hold certain expectations about their pupils, students actually mold their own behavior to conform to the expectations of their teachers" (1982, 97). We also know that teachers, as products of our society, hold—often unconsciously—different expectations for different students according to gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, and other factors. For example, as an illustration of how within-classroom tracking (ability grouping into groups with color names) affected teacher and student expectations of low-income Appalachian children, Kathleen Bennett used the following audiotaped segment: "[Teacher:] 'Look over here. [She points to an assignment written which deals with words that are opposites.] Blue Group, you will *not* do this, but everybody else will. May the Orange Group . . . Orange Group, you don't do this either. It might be a little too hard for you, but I *know* the Yellow Group and the Red Group can do this easily.'" Bennett also noted that the teacher's expectations of the ability groups became the students' expectations: "'I can't do that. I'm not in that group. I'm only in the Orange Group' was a typical statement in children's conversations with each other" (Bennett, 1991, 36).

Families and educators must hold high expectations for young women, expectations regarding their academic and work potential, as well as the importance of relationships with family, friends, and community. Training programs like Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement (GESA) that help teachers work with other teachers to identify their own biases and to

create more equal interaction patterns have proved extremely successful not just for girls or students of color but for all students. Adults can communicate to young women that they believe these young women are capable of great things and that, with hard work, they can reach their goals.

Overcoming Barriers and Developing Skills

There are indications that helping girls to develop skills, especially those involving overcoming challenges, can improve young women's self-esteem. It is important to emphasize that in most research, the evidence shows only links between specific skills and higher levels of self-esteem; it has not established causality. The findings are intriguing, however, and suggest further study.

Mary Ellen Colton and Susan Gore found that of girls who participate in some kind of sport, half had higher levels of self-esteem and less depression than the average. They recommend sports for young women as a way to help girls push their bodies, take risks, and overcome barriers. By having to rely on their own efforts and persist in developing a skill, Colton and Gore observed, young women begin to rely more on themselves and their perceptions than on others' opinions (Colton & Gore, cited in Schultz, 1991, 7).

The AAUW survey found a relationship between having high self-esteem, liking math and science, and aspiring to professional careers. Students who report liking math and science are more likely to list professional careers as their occupational choices, and this tendency is stronger among young women than among young men. In addition, the survey found that "students who like math possess significantly greater self-esteem—students with higher self-esteem like math and science more. These students like themselves more, feel better about their school work and grades, consider themselves more important, and feel better about their family relationships." Also interesting is that young women who like math and science are more confident about their appearance than is the case with young women who don't like math and science and with young men, whether they like these subjects or not. Young women who like math and science also worry less about others liking them (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, 16).

These findings suggest a possibility that young women who develop skills, especially skills that require persistence and breaking out of gender-role stereotypes, benefit in terms of self-esteem.

Conclusion

As children develop their concepts of who they are as individuals, they feel strongly what our society values and what it doesn't. While this socialization happens from the time they are born, there is much evidence that they feel societal/cultural values and experience bias in a stronger way as they enter adolescence.

We must work from two angles to transform our culture into one in which the perspectives and knowledge of females, and especially those from groups that have historically been oppressed and persecuted, are integrated and in which they receive messages that they have important things to contribute to communities and are valued. Much work must happen systemically in order to change a culture that maintains discriminatory institutions, systems, and thought. As long as sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression are institutionally supported and maintained, our culture will continue to be mopping up the damage both to individuals and to societal functions, and will be losing the contributions and support of most of its members. While we struggle to do this difficult and long-range work, however, we can help raise what Tracy Robinson and Janie Victoria Ward (1991) term "resisters"—young women who can see their strengths and weaknesses, believe in their individual and collective power, and live to their highest potential.

This paper has reviewed some of the many aspects of identity development that influence self-esteem, and the ways systemic bias may affect young women. The strategies highlighted in this paper balance encouraging young women to recognize and benefit from the strengths and contributions of their communities with empowering them to see their individual strengths and potential. Individual growth is most sure when rooted in community support. By encouraging young women along these parallel paths, we can help them to think critically about our society—both its strengths and its biases—and to see where their work and perspectives are needed.

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